

IN THE CLAIMS:

Cancel claims 1-14.

1-14 (Cancelled).

Add the following new claims:

22. (New) A method for franking mail pieces and for inspecting the franking, comprising the steps of:

obtaining postage fee units as electronic coins in an electronic protocol between an electronic coin source and a user of said electronic coins that individualizes each electronic coin by embodying information in each electronic coin that is unique for that electronic coin;

electronically storing said electronic coins in a device allocated to said user;

franking mail pieces with said device with respective postage fees comprised of at least one of said postage fee units, and debiting said electronic coins in said device as said postage fee units are consumed as said mail pieces are franked;

when franking each of said mail pieces, applying a machine-readable date stamp thereto at said device that includes an individualized electronic coin used for a postage fee unit consumed for franking that mail piece; and

inspecting the mail piece at a location remote from said device and determining, from the information embodied in the electronic coin in the date stamp on the mail piece, whether the electronic coin in the date stamp on the mail piece has been multiply used.

23. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of inspecting the mail piece comprises electronically storing the electronic coin in the date stamp on the inspected mail piece, and inspecting subsequent mail pieces by comparing the electronic coin in the date stamp thereon to the stored electronic coin.

24. (New) A method as claimed in claim 23 wherein the step of obtaining postage fee units as electronic coins comprises including an expiration date in said information embodied in each electronic coin, and wherein the step of electronically storing said electronic coins comprises storing said electronic coins in said device only up to the respective expiration dates of said electronic coins.

25. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of franking said mail piece comprises individually encoding each postage fee unit in a mail piece-specific manner that is unique for the mail piece for which the postage fee unit has been consumed, and wherein the step of applying a machine-readable data stamp comprises embodying said encoding in said date stamp on the mail piece, and wherein the step of inspecting the mail piece comprises using said encoding to determine whether said electronic coin has been multiply used.

26. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of franking a mail piece comprises combining a plurality of said electronic coins respectively representing a plurality of postage fee units totaling the postage fee for the mail piece.

27. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of franking a mail piece comprises dividing a postage fee unit represented by one of said electronic coins into a plurality of postage fee sub-units, and franking different mail pieces with the respective postage fee sub-units.

28. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of obtaining postage fee units as electronic coins comprises, in said electronic protocol, obtaining a secret key available only from said electronic coin source, and including information related to said secret key in the information embodied in each electronic coin that is unique for that electronic coin.

29. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of applying a machine-readable date stamp comprises including, in said date stamp, machine-readable information designating at least one of a production date of the date stamp, a production time of the date stamp, said postage fee, and an address.

30. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of applying a machine-readable date stamp comprises including in said date stamp, in addition to said electronic coin, machine-readable mail piece data characterizing a physical property of the mail piece on which said date stamp is applied.

31. (New) A method as claimed in claim 30 wherein the step of including machine-readable mail piece data in said date stamp comprises including machine-readable mail piece data characterizing a type of packaging material of said mail piece.

32. (New) A method as claimed in claim 30 wherein the step of including mail piece data in said date stamp comprises including mail piece data in said date stamp characterizing a surface structure of packaging material of said mail piece.

33. (New) A method as claimed in claim 30 wherein the step of including mail piece data in said date stamp comprises printing a label carrying said mail piece data and adhering said label to said mail piece.

34. (New) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the step of obtaining postage fee units as electronic coins comprises obtaining postage fee units as electronic coins all of equal monetary value.

Claim 15 has been amended as follows:

15. (Currently Amended) A system for franking postal matter with a franking apparatus and for inspecting the franking comprising:

a franking apparatus for franking postal matter, having a printing unit for applying a machine-readable date stamp onto postal matter, a central unit containing a fee module for loading, storing and debiting postage fees to be included in said date stamp, and having a print control module for controlling said printing unit;

a postage fee apparatus engageable in a communication protocol with said franking apparatus for making postage fee units electronically available to said franking apparatus as electronic coins each having unique coin identification information embodied therein, said ~~postage fee units~~ electronic coins being entered in said communication protocol into said fee module of said central unit and unique coin identification information being incorporated in said date stamp together with the electronic coin associated with the unique coin identification information by said printing unit, ~~said central unit including data in the date stamp in each item of postal matter which individualizes to~~ individualized the date stamp compared to other date stamps; and
an inspection unit remote from said franking apparatus for inspecting unique coin identification information in the date stamp to determine, from said

data unique coin identification information, whether said date stamp has been multiply used.

16. (Original) A system as claimed in claim 15 wherein said apparatus includes a cryptographic module for encrypting said data included in said date stamp, and wherein said inspection unit decrypts said data for determining whether said date stamp has been multiply used.

17. (Original) A system as claimed in claim 15 wherein said postage fee apparatus makes such postage fee unit available as respective electronic coins, with each electronic coin being individualized for inclusion in the date stamp for a respective item of postal matter, so that said electronic coins differ from each other when printed in said date stamp.

18. (Original) A system as claimed in claim 17 wherein said postage fee apparatus encrypts said postage fee units.

19. (Original) A system as claimed in claim 15 wherein said inspection unit includes a memory for storing respective date stamps on successively inspected items of postal matter, and wherein said inspection unit compares the date stamp on a currently inspected item of postal matter with said stored date stamps to determine whether the date stamp on the currently inspected item of postal matter has been previously used.

20. (Original) A franking apparatus for franking postal matter comprising:
a printing unit for applying a machine-readable date stamp containing an electronic coin onto an item of postal matter; and a central unit connected to said printing unit, containing a fee module for loading, storing and debiting postage fees to be included in said date stamp and

having a print control module for controlling said printing unit, said printing unit obtaining data from said fee module for inclusion in said date stamp which uniquely identifies said date stamp from any other date stamp on other items of postal matter so that multiple use of the individual date stamp is precluded.

21. (Original) A franking apparatus as claimed in claim 20 comprising a conventional computer and a conventional printer forming said printing unit.